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The Attic: a Memoir

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Bob Barnard's stories tell much about life on an Iowa farm when he grew up in the 1920s and 1930s and in Halverson's youth a generation before. He describes how farm families lived, how they entertained themselves, and how the work was done in an era that few now remember. His final essay, in which he discusses the harsh winter of 1936, was particularly accurate and enjoyable to read. I have heard similar stories from my own parents and grandparents who lived but a few miles from Halverson and Barnard.

This book is well worth having. The art will make a fine addition to your coffee table for all to enjoy, and the essays will not be out of place in your library with more formal histories.

The Attic: A Memoir, by Curtis Harnack. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993. vii, 190 pp. Illustrations, tables. \$14.95 paper.

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Difficult as it is to imagine, Curtis Harnack's second memoir is even more engrossing than his earlier one, *We Have All Gone Away*, published by Iowa State University Press in 1973. Unlike that work, which is a traditional autobiography, *The Attic* contains more than passages about the life of this prominent educator and writer. Harnack uses the occasion of cleaning out the massive attic of the family's farmhouse near Remsen, in Plymouth County, Iowa, following the death of an elderly uncle to discuss his own formative years, including a stint in the Navy at the end of World War II, and especially the lives of various family members.

Perhaps the most satisfying section relates to his Aunt Bertha. This portion is based in part on her diaries, which Harnack discovered in that remarkable attic of memories and memorabilia. Using his Aunt Bertha's writings, Harnack describes the life of a woman who remained unmarried, and explains how "old maids" on the Middle Border handled their status. Aunt Bertha struggled to find herself in society, a process that involved time with another single sister in a South Dakota village and at a business college in Sioux City. This is social history at its best. After all, stories of "common" people are not always available, even though scholars in recent years have attempted to examine the past from the "bottom up."

There is no question that *The Attic* is a "good read." Harnack has much to say about his Iowa roots and the social milieu of the first part of the twentieth century. And he does so in a pleasant, logical fashion. This nicely produced book is enhanced by numerous photographs, surely products of that attic cleaning.

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